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Janice Myck-Wayne

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In Defense of Play: Beginning the Dialog About the Power of Play



Always listen to children. . . .
They might have ideas we've never
thought of.

Alexander G. Bell,
telephone inventor

The subject of play in early learning experiences is important. As our nation's educational demeanor continues to shift to prescriptive curricula, standards-based instruction, and standardized tests, play is being squeezed out of the educational equation (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). And as the value of play is questioned in these times of rigorous academic accountability, teachers of young children are faced with either defending the use of play or giving it short shrift in the classroom. Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) write, "Despite an extensive research literature that clarifies the components of excellent, effective early education through playful learning, U.S. preschools and kindergartens are becoming academic 'boot camps'" (p. 10). According to Hirsch-Pasek et al., the downfall of play in early childhood programs occurred when, in 2003 with the reauthorization of Head Start, Congress narrowed the

Janice Myck-Wayne, EdD
California State University, Fullerton

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focus of Head Start to academic training. In ending the assessments of children's social and emotional functioning in favor of the assessments of emphasized preliteracy and premath skills, the focus of early childhood education transferred from how children learn to academic training.

The lack of play opportunities in early education can be attributed to several reasons. One reason is that the benefits of play are not easy to understand and assess. This leads to the attitude that play is only preparation for “real” learning in “big schools.” This attitude often results in parents' and teachers' viewing play as irrelevant to the learning process (Elkind, 2007). In reality, learning and play are compatible, and as Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) argue, learning takes place best when children are engaged and enjoying themselves. The idea that play and playful learning are important to early learning environments is certainly not a new idea. Research in early education supports the role of play for young children as an important modality of learning and psychological development (Ashiabi, 2007; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Eisert & Lamorey, 1996; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). In addition, Bredekamp and Copple (1997) assert that the most developmentally appropriate way for all children to learn is through play. Play, from the social constructivist viewpoint, facilitates a child's development by building and extending knowledge through cooperation with others and on his or her own (Ashiabi, 2007).

This shift in early education to overly didactic curricula can be

problematic for early childhood teachers, including teachers of young children with disabilities. This scenario is illustrated in a recent e-mail that was sent by Becky, an early childhood special education (ECSE) teacher enrolled in an alternative certification program.

In an e-mail sent to her professor, Becky seeks support as she recounts a recent discussion she had with her school principal. Becky teaches in a preschool ECSE classroom that is located on an elementary school campus. In the e-mail, Becky relates that during the discussion, the principal questioned the amount of playtime she allowed in her classroom. The principal remarked negatively that there was too much “downtime” and “free play.” The principal stated in the discussion, “There is a lot of downtime for students with breakfast, free choice, exploratory and dramatic play, walk time, and rest time.” In the e-mail, Becky wrote, “How do I begin to explain to the principal that dramatic and exploratory play is research based and a best practice for teachers of young children? In addition, it is necessary, because all the students in my class have at least one play goal on their Individualized Education Plan.”

It appears that the principal failed to observe that during recess and dramatic play, staff were there to facilitate play and language. Nor did the principal understand that in a 5.5-hr day, routines, such as breakfast and snack, provide opportunities to introduce communication through the use of systems like the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). Mealtimes and other routine-based activities offer excellent opportunities to elicit language and to work on self-help skills, social interaction, fine motor skills, and

independence goals. As educators of young children, we must be able to articulate our practice. What could Becky have told her principal? How could Becky have begun the dialog about play? How could Becky have used the research on play and learning to help her explain the role of play and playful learning in her classroom routine and activities?

The purpose of this article is to provide early childhood practitioners such as Becky and her principal a way to develop a common understanding of the importance of play in the early learning experience of young children. Meaningful discussion among teachers, parents, administrators, and teacher candidates regarding play in early childhood education programs is critical to ensure the growth and development of young children with and without disabilities. What follows is a definition of play and how play can enhance interventions for children with disabilities and facilitate academic learning for each and every child. The article concludes with a discussion of the role of early childhood special educators in incorporating play in the curriculum and clearly articulating the importance of play in the classroom to parents, administrators, and other stakeholders.

Defining Play in the Context of Early Learning

How do we define play? It seems essential that educators of all young children develop a definition of play

as it relates to their curriculum and the activities in their classrooms. It is difficult to discuss the importance of play in early childhood programs without such a definition. According to Reiber, Smith, and Noah (1998), play is a crucial process that contributes to learning throughout the life span. Play serves to motivate learning in addition to contributing to cognitive development. As educators, Reiber et al. contend that we must connect play as a motivation into learning:

Play is an essential part of the learning process throughout life and should not be neglected. . . . Play that is serious and focused within a learning environment can help learners construct a more personalized and constructive understanding. As educators, our challenge is to implicate motivation into learning through play and to recognize that play has an important cognitive role in learning. (Reiber et al., 1998, p. 35)

Vygotsky (1978), who limited his definition of play to dramatic and make-believe play, described play as having three components: children creating an imaginary situation, children accepting and acting out roles, and children following a set of rules determined by specific roles. Bodrova (2008) reinforces Vygotsky's views on play and describes play as "the leading source of development in preschool years" (p. 359). It is through dramatic and make-believe play that young children develop higher mental functions. In addition, play supports the development of "internalized representations" because in play

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activities, children act on internal ideas and not external reality. Play also encourages symbolic and abstract thinking through role-playing (Bodrova, 2008). Most importantly, though, play should be enjoyable (Bergen, 2009). Play must include some element of fun, in addition to being internally motivating. A child must be actively engaged in an activity that can be shaped to his or her own experiences. An activity controlled, shaped, and defined by others is not play. Furthermore, a developed sense of playfulness appears to promote divergent thinking, creative acts, and verbal intelligence in preschoolers (Bergen, 2009).

Play and Young Children With Disabilities

Play and playful learning in the preschool setting are important for young children with disabilities as well (Wolery, 2005). In their review of the literature on teaching pretend play to children with disabilities, Barton and Wolery (2008) describe their views on play for children with disabilities as follows:

Teaching children to play is important because play (a) is flexible and can be used in multiple settings, (b) sets the occasions to having social and communicative interactions with peers, (c) increases the likelihood of learning in natural settings, and (d) may offer a foundation for developing leisure skills. Furthermore, play is a context in which intervention strategies for other goals

(social, communicative, cognitive) are embedded. (p. 109)

Buchanan and Johnson (2009) affirm that from a developmental perspective, play is significant as a means for learning, development, and intervention. Therefore, children with disabilities need time for opportunities to engage in exploratory and pretend play, as do their typically developing peers. In addition, research on social engagement and interactions of children with autism (Kishida & Kemp, 2009) specify play and peer engagement as a means to increase positive peer interaction. Facilitated play with peers leads to an increase in social interaction and engagement, whereas child-teacher interactions can lead to less of an increase in social interactions and engagement.

Linking Play and Academic Development

The discussion of the role of play in ECSE is indeed complicated. Luckily, there is a considerable amount of research in the field on the positive effects of play on academic development. To respond to parents', administrators' and policy makers' concerns that play is an unproductive use of time that does not promote academic development, educators must be able to link learning outcomes to play activities. Often adults think of play in terms of recreational activities or time off from work rather than as the work of the child (Elkind, 2007).

Visualize a dramatic play area in a preschool classroom. What are

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children learning in the dramatic play area? Elkind (2007) points out that within the dramatic play center, children are learning social skills, such as cooperation, turn taking, and following directions. In the dramatic play center, children may be developing early literacy and problem-solving skills via symbolic play opportunities. For example, play enhances language development through the child's verbalizations and use of vocabulary. Researchers Bodrova and Leong (2003) indicate that play enhances learning through the development of comprehension, attention span, curiosity, empathy, concentration, and group participation. Furthermore, pretend play has been connected to academic content in literacy and numeracy (Roskos & Christie, 2000). The importance of sociodramatic play to a child's socioemotional development cannot be ignored and is highlighted by Ashiabi (2007). He states that sociodramatic play develops the skills of problem solving, cooperation, social understanding, and rule following. Essentially, through play, children learn conflict resolution as they interact with peers learning to work cooperatively on common tasks. Furthermore, dramatic play provides the venue for children to accept the perspectives of others, understand the difference between pretend and real, and learn to regulate their actions.

Table 1 provides a brief guide to some of the skills developed in different types of play. This table is not exhaustive of all the benefits of play or their links to academic development; rather, it serves as a starting point for supporting the play activities in the early childhood

classroom and special education classrooms. Teachers of all young children—both typically developing and those with disabilities—can develop similar tables or matrices to embed play and playful learning activities in classroom activities and routines. It is important for all teachers to be able to demonstrate to parents and administrators the purpose of play. One way to accomplish this is to link learning objects with play opportunities.

The Teacher's Role

The previous sections of this article include information on the importance of play and its positive effects on learning in early childhood settings. An essential element to consider is the teacher's role in incorporating play within the curriculum and articulating its importance to colleagues, administrators, parents, and other community members.

Incorporating Play in the Curriculum

The question to ponder here is, “How can the teacher enable young children to follow their interests and become motivated learners?” The classroom teacher needs to incorporate opportunities within the curriculum to explore and develop concepts. Sarama and Clements (2009) suggest that teachers schedule long periods of playtime as well as provide enriched environments and materials. Dramatic play provides one example of how to incorporate play as part of the daily routine. Teachers should schedule time for play activities so

Table 1
A Sample of Learning Opportunities in Play Activities

Type of Play Activity	Social/Emotional Skills	Language/Literacy Skills	Cognitive/Academic Skills
Dramatic, pretend, or make-believe play	Cooperation, turn taking, following directions, group participation, empathy, increased attention span	Increased verbalizations, vocabulary development, language comprehension	Problem solving, curiosity, creativity
Block or manipulative play, exploratory play	Cooperation, increased attention span, learning through the senses	Development of academic language and vocabulary, categorization	Problem solving and higher-level thinking as children seek to understand the physical world

that children are given enough time to extend their play. Often for children with disabilities, dramatic play requires more time because language and social skills may be delayed. In addition, for children with disabilities, the dramatic play area may be the one area of the classroom that offers the opportunity to engage in self-initiated pretend play for social and physical development. According to de Groot Kim (2005), the dramatic play area offers a “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978) in which the child often behaves in advance of her or his typical behavior. In her research on child interactions during play, De Groot Kim observed that communicative exchanges were limited during table activities, when the child with disabilities primarily communicated with his assistant. This study demonstrated that most of the interactions between all children in the classroom at the table activities were focused on the materials, and there were few reciprocal interactions between peers. The block and dramatic play areas, conversely, offered multiple opportunities for the children to communicate verbally and nonverbally and to increase social interactions. The research of Kishida

and Kemp (2009) supports this need for young children with disabilities to have opportunities to engage and interact with peers. They found that children with autism spectrum disorders engaged with peers in inclusive preschool settings to a higher degree than with peers in a segregated setting. The difference in engagement is attributed to more opportunities to interact with peers.

Sarama and Clements (2009) observed that along with social competence, a multitude of skills can be developed during play in the dramatic play areas. The dramatic play area needs to be dynamic. It should rotate with meaningful themes and the interests of the children. Sarama and Clements use a “shoe store” to illustrate the power of play in a dramatic play center. In the shoe store, children were engaged in classification, measuring, doing simple arithmetic, using number words, and learning about money. A key point in the research indicated that to link learning outcomes to exploratory and pretend play, teachers should think outside of the box when planning play areas (Sarama & Clements, 2009). Dramatic play areas can include a doctor’s office, veterinarian’s office, car repair shop, shoe store, restaurant, science lab,

pet store, bookstore, classroom, and travel agency. Playful learning will take place if children are interested and motivated in the toys and activity. The ECSE teacher can use guided playful instruction to support involvement in play and learning activities.

Articulating the Importance of Play

The ECSE teacher discussed at the opening of this article struggled to defend her daily classroom routine and activities. Her administrator felt that she was not doing enough teacher-directed activities with her students. For a teacher such as Becky to be able to continue to incorporate play in her classroom, it is important that she is conversant and knowledgeable about child development and the benefits of play. Thus, for Becky to be able to justify her daily curriculum, she needs to be able to articulate the learning outcomes

supported by each activity. She needs to be able to discuss play as a medium for learning, as an extender of language development, and as a facilitator for symbolic thinking (Wilford, 2005).

What the administrator viewed merely as “free play” needs to be discussed in terms of how the teacher structured each of those play opportunities to support the learning outcomes for each child in the classroom. In other words, can the teacher explain the “why” of the classroom activity? Furthermore, can the teacher explain his or her role in the activity?

Ashiabi (2007) suggests that teachers play several roles in child-initiated play: “an observer and recorder, stage manager and facilitator, mediator, or participant in play” (p. 203). To carry out each of these roles, the teacher must be able to understand play as well as be able to construct and scaffold the play experiences that are appropriate for each child’s development. As an observer, the teacher gains information about each child that assists in the curriculum planning process. DiCarlo and Vagianos (2009) suggest using playtime as an opportunity to observe children’s different play styles and preferences. The teacher can collect data during the free-play period. In acting as a facilitator, the teacher provides and organizes the appropriate play materials, constructs the play area, schedules playtime, and sets the ground rules for each activity. In facilitating, the teacher can prompt a child’s interest and participation within the play situation. Props and toys should be varied according to the planned curriculum and the



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interests and developmental levels of the children in the classroom. In addition, props should be adapted to be accessible to all children. Teachers can support a child's interactions in play through incidental comments that extend play or by offering another prop or an added scenario. Teachers need to be able to explain how they are facilitating play and playful learning in the classroom.

Furthermore, as policy makers (Pelligrini, 2008) and parents (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008; Elkind, 2007; Wilford, 2005) question the value of play in the early childhood classroom setting, teachers need to be able to explain and explore the importance of play with parents and administrators. Parents are concerned about how their child will compete academically. The prevailing attitude appears to subscribe to pushing teacher-directed scripted curricula and prescriptive interventions at a very early age (Elkind, 2007). Fisher et al. (2008) explored the perceptions of play among mothers and concluded that there was a divergence in beliefs about play and academic learning between experts and parents. Educators categorized structured activities as nonplay and therefore possessing less learning value than unstructured activities. Mothers, on the other hand, perceived structured activities as having more learning value. Aligning the differing perceptions of the learning value of play may require, according to Fischer et al., educating the public to the benefits of play in the same way that we educate the public about the value

of child safety issues. Educators of all young children, with and without disabilities, must lead the discussion on what constitutes play (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). This discussion can be accomplished only if those educators working with all young children can articulate the research on play and learning.

Closing Thoughts

This article was primarily motivated by the issues raised by the request for support from the new ECSE teacher. Becky was not sure how to react to her administrator's comments related to free play in her classroom. Although there is much research to support play in the early childhood environment for all children, it may be difficult for teachers to articulate their knowledge about the importance of play to those who question the practice in the classroom. Ranz-Smith (2007) suggests that teachers be able to first explore their own attitudes toward play in the learning process. Attitudes toward play affect a teacher's practice and instructional decisions. Early childhood and ECSE practitioners should begin the dialog about the role of play in learning and its implications for practice with colleagues, parents, administrators, and policy makers. Using research as a foundation, the discussion can explore realistic curricula and meaningful activities to benefit the learning of all children.

If you found yourself in the same situation as Becky, what would you do? How would you begin the dialog?

Learn From Inventors

Inventors, when asked what inspires them, often talk about playing as a child. "Among inventors' most frequently cited childhood play experiences are: mechanical tinkering, fiddling with construction toys, reflecting in and about nature, and drawing or engaging in other forms of visual modeling" (Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation, 2008, p. 2). Children's inventive play leads to inventors' playful approaches. When children explore with all their senses, they are tinkering and experimenting. Furthermore, as children imagine and pretend, they are developing the abilities to visualize, model, and draw analogies. Communicating through social

play allows children to brainstorm, role-play, and participate in teamwork. Playing with puzzles and patterns leads to the development of problem-solving skills as well as the development of the ability to think in and out of the box (Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation, 2008). None of these skills are acquired through repetitive and tedious work (Bergen, 2009). Therefore, to prepare children to create "new worlds in their design in later work experiences," children need to have play experiences that spark imagination and encourage them to ask "what might happen" (Bergen, 2009, p. 418). Through play experiences, children expand their curiosity and develop the habit of persistence.

Note

You may reach Janice Myck-Wayne by e-mail at jmyckwayne@fullerton.edu.

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